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AUTHOR Baker, Victoria J.
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ABSTRACT

Schools in Australian Aboriginal communities are pulled between an educational model that stresses cultural pride and preservation and one that emphasizes uniformity of education to prepare Aboriginal students for a place in the dominant society. The tension between these objectives is seen in these case studies of schools in two remote Queensland Aboriginal communities. Lying 30 miles off the mainland, Palm Island served as an Aboriginal penal colony in the early 1900s. Community problems include high rates of violent crime, alcoholism, and family abuse; inadequate housing; and a 90% unemployment rate. Yarrabah is a remote coastal community with similar problems. Public schools in these two communities have modern facilities, and are making efforts to involve students in learning. However, teachers (virtually all white) are assigned to these schools and experience alienation and culture shock. Few stay more than the required 2 years. Community values are often at odds with academic competitiveness and success, and community and family problems have negative effects on student behavior and achievement. Common student problems are poor attendance, dropping out, low achievement, inappropriate classroom behavior, and hearing problems. St. Michael's, a private Catholic school on Palm Island, follows a different model from state schools and has a community school board, some black teachers, and black teacher aides that serve as community liaisons. The teachers are dedicated and work hard at bridging the gap between school and community. While some progress has been made in making school attractive to students, the forces militating against the success of the school are overwhelming. (SV)

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AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL EDUCATION AT THE FULCRUM OF FORCES OF CHANGE: REMOTE QUEENSLAND COMMUNITIES

Victoria J. Baker
Eckerd College
St. Petersburg, Florida

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AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL EDUCATION AT THE FULCRUM OF FORCES OF CHANGE: REMOTE QUEESNLAND COMMUNITIES

Original man standing tall with pride,
Upon the land his heart belongs.
He needs no map or tourist guide
Nor teachers to teach him songs.

From "Original Man"
by Neari Lowah.
In Black Voices, July 1988.

Introduction.

The education of children living in Australian Aboriginal communities is plagued by innumerable problems. Many of the problems are interrelated with broader, more general troubles that permeate diverse levels of Aboriginal life and perpetuate a vicious cycle: high unemployment due to lack of skills and training; unacceptance, racism and prejudiced attitudes encountered among white Australians; alcoholism and a high incidence of violence in Aboriginal communities. At the same time, the Aboriginals have a sincere desire to take pride in their cultural past, frustrated by two realizations: that nothing will bring back the days before colonial invasion, and that a worthy place for them in modern Australian society is difficult to envision under present circumstances.

These dilemmas are reflected in the problems facing educators and learners, e.g. difficulty in getting trained Aboriginal teachers and/or dedicated white teachers and principals, high dropout rate and poor attendance among students, and a low percentage of students who go on to secondary or higher education. An all-pervasive tension exists in the Aboriginal communities and is seen in the volatility of student behavior and the lower attainment of goals. The schools are pulled between two general models. One stresses preservation of cultural identity and traditions, reinforcing pride in one's ethnic origins and adopting educational strategies appropriate to Aboriginal lifestyles. The other stresses uniformity of education and the aim of preparing Aboriginal children to fill a place in the modern industrial system of the dominant Australian society. Education is thus at the fulcrum of two forces of change, which are often opposing, thereby increasing the tension.

This paper reports case studies of two remote Queensland Aboriginal communities. The research was carried out as a project together with Ford Foundation scholar, Angela Matusik, for whom I was serving as the sponsor in the summer of 1990. Most of the fieldwork data was gained from lengthy interviews with educational officials of diverse levels in Sydney (NSW), with educational anthropologists at James Cook University in Townsville (Queensland)[1], and with the school principals and several teachers from each school. This data was supplemented by classroom observations. The timely conference on Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Futures (July 11-13, 1990, James Cook University) provided additional insights through papers and discussions with experts, both black and white.

The Palm Island Community and its State School.

From the air, Palm Island is an idyllic, lush green, coral reef island, about 45 miles north of Townsville and 30 miles off the mainland coast. The island served as a penal colony early in the century, to which Aboriginals were deported for various offenses. In 1928 a quarantine hospital was set up on nearby Fantome Island to care for lepers and to screen Aboriginals for infectious diseases before sending them to Palm Island. It was called "Blackfellow's Graveyard" by one doctor in 1933 (Kyle 1990:1). As a penal colony, indigenous peoples from many different tribes in northeast Australia were thrown together, causing language/communication problems and undermining any tribal cohesion. Conditions were deplorable, and life was regimented by bells. In the 1960s the inhabitants finally gained some say in the administration of their island through Community Councils, although power was still vested in the Superintendent and the Department of Native Affairs staff (Kyle 1990:1). Amnesty International described Palm Island as a concentration camp in 1974 (**Canberra Times**, Feb. 6, 1974, cited in Kyle 1990:1). It was not until 1984 that Aboriginal Councils were elected to take the job of Local Government Authority, but the Palm Islanders were in no way prepared to take over the responsibility of running their local government (Kyle 1990:2). A tense situation has prevailed, and Palm Island continues to be ridden with a shocking record of violent crime, a high incidence of alcoholism and family abuse, a lack of income-generating activities, and 90 percent unemployment. Only incidental private farming and fishing take place.

The community 'cantine' is the biggest profit-making enterprise through sale of alcoholic beverages, and there are few other recreational facilities, not even a movie theater. Living off the 'dole' has become a way of life for most inhabitants.

The housing situation is highly inadequate. There are only 200 houses for 3000 people. The design of the houses is based on the single, Western nuclear family model and is poorly adaptable to Aboriginal lifestyles. Overcrowding and poor maintenance are endemic; many houses are occupied by two or three extended families, with as many as 16 or 17 occupants. The children are frequently shuttled from one household to another due to violent family quarrels. As pointed out by several teachers, the children don't say they "live" at a certain address, but rather that they "stay" at a certain one.

The island, moreover, can be classified as very remote, for there are no ferries and only a few supply boats that connect it to the mainland. It is necessary to take the small plane from a private company for Aus.$60.00 return, which flies from Townsville to Palm Island and back twice daily. Such expense is prohibitive for most islanders except on sparse occasions. It is frequently the white teachers and hospital medical workers who are seen on the plane. Unfamiliar "whitefellas" are eyed with suspicion on the island.

In the setting described above there are two schools that cater to the Aboriginal children.

The Palm Island State School is housed in an attractive set of buildings, centrally located, and strikes one as having the most up-to-date supplies and equipment. The Australian government has spared no costs in the school's physical attributes. There is a comfortable teacher's lounge, bright classrooms with modern desks and cabinets, a separate manual arts building full of wood-working and other shop equipment, a computer center with a terminal for each class member, a fully equipped home economics room, arts center, and library. The immediate impression is: if there are educational problems, they are not due to a material shortage.

The school has an enrollment of 288 pupils (136 boys, 152 girls), of which 280

are Aboriginal, the rest being children of temporary white residents. There are nine teachers in addition to the principal; all are white, except for one Maori. All the teachers are young, single, and in their second or third year of teaching. All but one were posted to Palm Island, which is considered to be a hardship area. One teacher confided that he had been asked to fill a gap when a teacher left unexpectedly; he agreed to come, with the understanding that he would have his choice of locations after Palm Island. There are two Aboriginal assistants or teacher aides assigned to each grade - a program for better integration of school and community - although in practice the aides are given mostly uncreative, routine jobs. The teachers are expected to stay two years, although three years is the normal period.

Interviews with the principal and several teachers provided the following findings and insights into attitudes.

The teachers, for the most part, dread coming to Palm Island and experience culture shock and a sense of isolation when they arrive. They have had no special training to deal with Aboriginal culture and have difficulty understanding the pidgin English. One of the most disturbing things, according to the teachers, is the high incidence of physical abuse, and the high suicide and murder rates. Erica Kyle, a black community leader, writes that "the teachers live in houses with wire reinforcements all around. They look like prisons" (1990:5). The teachers, from their side, find it hard to bridge the gap with the community, given their temporary status and the suspicion with which they are viewed.

The teachers point out that the Palm Island children are about two years behind mainstream schools and that truancy is a big problem. Typical characteristics which they find hard to cope with include the verbal abuse, aggression and volatility of the children. According to the teachers, the students cannot be taught punctuality, for the latter stay up very late in the overcrowded, noisy households and are extremely tired in the morning; they come in to school any time they please and stay away with just as much ease. A typical behavior of Aboriginal children is that of "teasing," taunting their peers who may try to conform to the rules or may try to excell in the class. In the school, as well as in the community, ambition and competition are not values prized by the

Aboriginal tradition. The levelling mechanism of teasing serves to frustrate the white teachers, who are trained to encourage, reward and teach children through competitive activities.

Half the children suffer from partial hearing loss, a condition which is also common in other Aboriginal communities and may be traced to abuse, illness and neglect. The situation is frustrating to the teachers with a classical approach to pedagogy. It is not uncommon that pupils ignore rules, walk out of class in the middle of instruction, or otherwise reflect that they are only in partial communication.

When asked what was being done by the school to ameliorate some of the problems, the principal shared information on two programs. One was the new and compulsory marine studies and fishing program, funded by a grant. The idea is to train the students in a field directly relevant to their life on the island. one useful for income generation. The other concerned a newly planned program on Human Relationships Education. At a preliminary community meeting. parents were encouraged to list the problems which are most critical for them. "Under-age drinking" had the most responses (31) followed by "lack of discipline" (20). "more parental involvement in school" (12), "lack of activities" (11), "lack of respect" (11), "lack of love in the home" (11). and "violence" (10). The list of 60 issues had only 4 parents mentioning "loss of culture," 3 mentioning a "cross-culture bridge," and 2 mentioning "more relevant shcool activities for Aboriginal children." It would appear that the parents are preoccupied with more immediate concerns, ones which have a direct effect on children's behavior, and perhaps ones about which they feel guilty (e.g. "lack of love in the home"), rather than a concern with possible underlying causes of troubles or the undermining of cultural values.

Let us now jump to a different community with a state school before coming back to Palm Island to discuss the latter's private school.

The Yarrabah Community School.

This is another remote Aboriginal school in the state of Queensland. Located about 50 miles south of Cairns, the last stretch is followed over mountainous roads to reach the beautiful spot on Mission Bay where about 1800 Aboriginals live in the Yarrabah Community. The Yarrabah School is supported by the state and federal governments and has 3 divisions: the pre-school (enrl. 98); the primary school, grades 1-6 (enrl. 321); and the high school, grades 7-12 (enrl. 100). The school principal and all teachers are white, with the exception of one Maori teacher in the high school. There are a number of young black women serving as teacher aides; the low remuneration for this work reflects its lack of prestige. Yarrabah is considered a remote area school by the Ministry of Education, having a rating of '6' on a 10-point scale, '10' being the most remote.

In spite of the beautiful beaches and the attractive Queensland climate, most of the teachers dread being transferred to Yarrabah. The principal told that it was agreed that he would only have to stay two years. His wife is very unhappy and rarely leaves the house. While most of the interviewed teachers said they were looking forward to the end of their assignments in Yarrabah, a couple said they hated the work in the beginning but have learned to love it as very rewarding; they were intending to stay several years beyond the minimum. More typical, however, was the statement made by one of the high school teachers:

> I dreaded it and had only negative ideas about what it would be like. The beginning was indeed a culture shock. We're not well prepared, don't know much about their culture before we come. I live in a town about 15 miles from here. Crossing over that hill at the end of a work day here is a relief: I can forget it all, leave it all behind.

Many of the same problems as those encountered on Palm Island are cited: poor attendance, much teasing, swearing and aggressiveness in the classroom, high dropout rates, low achievement levels, and children with hearing problems; in the community is high unemployment, violence, alcoholism, vandalism, abuse of women and children, and overcrowded situations in the homes - all contributing to increased problems of the pupils at school.

Despite the feelings of alienation harbored by many teachers, the classrooms are filled with creative projects. The school is making concerted efforts to keep

the children involved in wholesome endeavors. Every afternoon there are sports events; programs to stimulate the popular activities of horseback riding and fishing are organized; and occasional field trips to Cairns are taken. The parents are becoming more involved, now running the 'tuck' (snack) shop. A school festival is held each year in which native dishes (such as sea turtle) are shared with the teachers. The school's Aboriginal caretaker of many years stresses that the school is functioning much better in recent years.

There is a lot of frustrated human potential represented in the community, as noted by the science teacher, a white resident of 16 years, who has made a small museum and the history of the community culture his hobby. According to him, it is the unnatural situation - living as a sort of suppressed exiles in their own land - which causes an all-pervasive tension. He comments, "They have no conscious realization of such tension, but it is evident in the overly stressful behavior of both the children and the adults." Thus, the Yarrabah School, with all its good intentions, is in a quandary concerning its role: trying to help preserve the pride and culture of the students, although the teachers themselves are little acquainted with it; and trying to prepare students for a respectable role in the modern world.

St. Michael's School, Palm Island.

Moving back to Palm Island, let us take a look at a private Catholic school which follows a somewhat different model from the state schools discussed above. St. Michael's is much smaller than the state school, having only 140 students in grades 1-7, as opposed to 280. It has a local School Board of Aboriginal community representatives, and three of its seven teachers are black. Each class also has an Aboriginal teacher aide to serve as a liaison between the teacher and the community. The white principal and his family have been on Palm Island for two years. His four children go to the St. Michael's School, but are subject to a lot of teasing, he says.

Although the expenses for running the school are funded through various sources, including the federal government and Catholic funding organizations, the school is on a much tighter budget than the State School. Parents have to pay school

fees, although they are nominal. The school sponsors fairs and other fund-raising activities to help pay for supplies. The building is of the traditional breezy design built on posts, off the ground, and the classrooms look colorful and inviting; but the school lacks the sophisticated additions present in the State School, e.g. manual arts building, computer room, etc.

One of the Aboriginal teachers explained that all the children and teachers at the St. Michael's School are there because they chose to be. The parents who are Catholics or those who want a smaller school with more of an Aboriginal focus and some black teachers as role models, may choose St. Michael's. Unlike the State School, none of the teachers at St. Michael's are there because they were assigned the post against their wishes; on the contrary, all made a conscious choice for their school. Most of the teachers have a positive attitude toward their jobs, even though they must cope with the same problems as the state schools have, such as students' progress being behind that of their white counterparts, and little encouragement from home.

One of the teachers is a Canadian who married a Palm Island Aboriginal woman and settled on the island. Two are young, idealistic white teachers who wanted a challenge. The three black teachers were all trained in the Aboriginal and Islander Teacher Education Program (AITEP) at James Cook University. One of these, from York Island, has married a Palm Islander and settled permanently. Another, from Brisbane, stresses that just because you are black, it does not guarantee acceptance and respect; there is much suspicion and rivalry among tribes, even in a location like Palm Island, where some forty different tribes are represented.

One thing the teachers have in common is their desire to reach the children and make the educational experience a meaningful one. They agree that it is an advantage not having the pressure of the State School, where specific curricular programs are handed out to be taught. One of the black teachers explained that she creates much of her own material, adapts the book lessons to be more appropriate to the Palm Island Community, and tries to use the pidgin expressions and Aboriginal vocabulary that 'speaks' to the children.

An observation of the first grade taught by an Aboriginal teacher showed a very

relaxed atmosphere in a relatively unstructured setting. The teacher was literally down on the rug floor with a group of children in the reading corner, while other children were carrying out creative projects with a black teacher's aide. The teacher of this class wrote an article in Black Voices while she was a student in the AITEP program, in which she states her belief that "school failure of minority children is due to misunderstanding and unappreciative attitudes of teachers" (Coutts 1988:1). Watching this teacher striving to implement the principles and skills learned in her AITEP training years (Loos and Miller 1988) gave the impression that real inspiration and dedication are involved. She must work hard at not blaming the victim, and at bridging the gap between community and school, two issues she addressed in her article (Coutts 1988:2). It would seem that some progress is being made in making the school an interesting place so that children want to come and learn, but the forces militating against the success of the school are overwhelming.

Another Aboriginal teacher explained the difficulty in approaching the parents: "We even take the reports to the parents, for it is hard to get them to come here." The parents feel helpless and inadequate, she confided. As many as half are illiterate, and they are not in a position to give much stimulation from home for the children to do well. An adult education program was once tried, but it was gradually abandoned due to lack of participation. The practical problems at home take priority over concern about their children's school progress. The hope of getting a job is dampened by past experience. And yet the parents do feel it is very important for their children to get an education, as was evident from interviews with parents and community leaders, as well as from sources in the literature (Folds 1987:xi-xii; NAEC 1980:63).

Getting positive feedback through real-life success stories to which the students can relate, is slow and sometimes discouraging. Those students who finish seventh grade and go off to a (totally funded) boarding school on the mainland, are frequently unable to adapt outside the insulating atmosphere of the Aboriginal community. Expulsion due to fighting is common, as are cases of students who cannot function because of homesickness. Even while interviewing the principal, a call was received about a former St. Michael's student who just got expelled from her new school in Townsville.

The principal of the St. Michael's School lists as one of his aims, to turn the school over to a completely Aboriginal staff. He concedes, however, that the potential success of the school is structurally tied to the community in which it operates. As long as the wide range of social problems exist, afflicting an isolated people who are a long way from achieving a viable and respected place in the dominant society, no amount of teacher education, dedication, or cross-cultural curriculum planning will have a fair chance of curing the ills.

Conclusion.

On a superficial level it appears that the educational situation on Australian Aboriginal communities is under control. All the elements for formal schooling are there, with administrators, teachers, buildings, equipment, supplies, curricula and programs. But why are these schools falling short of their aims, with lower attainment levels and less streaming through to higher levels of education? The structural roadblocks which cannot be tackled by education alone provide a large part of the answer. Still, there is much to say for training Aboriginal teachers to play an important role in the search for a dignified and satisfying place for Aboriginals in modern Australian society. Success involves attitude changes on the side of the whites, and a cultivation of confidence and a sense of worth on the side of the blacks.

It would seem that schools such as St. Michael's, in which teachers are there because they want to be, and a good portion of the teachers are Aboriginal - to serve as role models and carriers of indigenous culture - have a better chance of success. Teacher education programs like AITEP provide indispensable bridges. The program's research makes clear that there is a "fundamental weakness in any curriculum where non-Aboriginal educators are taking responsibility for teaching Aboriginal knowledge to Aboriginal students through non-Aboriginal learning processes in non-Aboriginal institutions" (Miller 1988:127).

The schools are at a pivotal point, where it is important to maintain a balance between taking pride in the old ways but also learning the new. Aboriginal teachers have "made it" in society and have mastered that balance. Increasing their numbers and thus their contribution toward their people's future is one advisable strategy for the tenuous period ahead.

NOTE

[1] I would like to thank Professor Noel Loos and Professor Geoff Coombs of James Cook University, Townsville (Qld), for the generous time and assistance they provided - both in securing the cooperation of key contact persons, and in sharing their wealth of knowledge on issues of Aboriginal educational.

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